

## The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World

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Ali, O. (2011). The African diaspora in the Indian Ocean world. Retrieved from <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africansindianocean/index2.php>

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### **Abstract:**

Over the course of nearly 20 centuries, millions of East Africans crossed the Indian Ocean and its several seas and adjoining bodies of water in their journey to distant lands, from Arabia and Iraq to India and Sri Lanka.

Called Kaffir, Siddi, Habshi, or Zanj, these men, women and children from Sudan in the north to Mozambique in the south Africanized the Indian Ocean world and helped shape the societies they entered and made their own.

Free or enslaved, soldiers, servants, sailors, merchants, mystics, musicians, commanders, nurses, or founders of dynasties, they contributed their cultures, talents, skills and labor to their new world, as millions of their descendants continue to do. Yet, their heroic odyssey remains little known.

*The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World* traces a truly unique and fascinating story of struggles and achievements across a variety of societies, cultures, religions, languages and times.

### **Article:**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

When we think about the African Diaspora, most of us turn our attention to the rich array of images, cultures and histories of black men and women in the Atlantic world. This diaspora, beginning in the 16th century, included an estimated 10.7 million forced migrants—about 2 million had died during the Middle Passage—from West, West-Central, and Southeastern Africa whose labor, creativity, traditions and struggles have made much of the world what it is today. However, there has been a far older dispersion of Africans through the Indian Ocean, which has parallels to the Atlantic migration but also a number of significant differences. It began well over a thousand years before and likewise had a direct or indirect impact on tens of millions of people through personal contact, cultural influence or the fruits of black labor, yet it remains the lesser known of the two major migratory trajectories of Africans in the world.

Archeological and genetic evidence indicate that between 40,000 and 50,000 years ago, Africans began migrating across the Middle East and South Asia in waves of humanity that populated Eurasia. Since antiquity regular contacts may be seen between Africa and Asia with sub-Saharan men and women appearing in the art of South and Southeast Asia. However, the historically documented dispersion of Africans in the Indian Ocean world was largely the product of migrations (voluntary and forced) beginning in the first century and continuing through the 20th.

Sweeping across the Indian Ocean and its several seas and adjoining bodies of water, lateen-rigged ships—dhows—bearing Africans were propelled by seasonal winds that blew from the southwest for part of the year and then reversed direction. Over nearly 20 centuries Africans journeyed to distant lands often radically different from their own—geographically, linguistically and culturally. Initially, most of these people from dozens of ethnicities and societies, and practicing various religions, came from the coastal areas of eastern Africa. Over time, more came from the interior Great Lakes region, followed by Central Africa.

Like their counterparts in the Atlantic world, most African migrants to Asia were enslaved as captives of war, the victims of outright kidnapping, or made chattel as debt repayment. They were then sold, sometimes several times over, for ever greater profit. But not all Africans in the Indian Ocean world were captives, just as not all enslaved people were Africans. Unlike in the Americas, slavery in the Indian Ocean world was never racially codified, and enslaved people in the Middle East and Asia came from different racial backgrounds.

### *Characteristics*

If the Atlantic world is our general point of reference, four key features distinguish the African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean world—beyond differences in time span, numbers of migrants and geography:

1. Historically, Africans and their descendants in the Indian Ocean world tended to have greater social mobility, due to Islamic laws and societal conventions that incorporated the children of enslaved women into the homes of slaveholders as free kin (the law of *Istilad*); allowed for greater responsibilities among enslaved men who had specialized skills (for instance, administrative or equestrian); and provided explicit Quranic justification (i.e., Sura *Al-Nur* [The Light] 24:33) for emancipation.
2. Africans and their descendants long played a military and security role in the Indian Ocean world. They were regarded as exceptional warriors, and since they were outsiders, with no filial connections to indigenous populations, they were seen as trustworthy by rulers. While people of African descent sometimes bore arms in the Atlantic, Africans were long recruited in the Indian Ocean world to serve in armed capacities.
3. In comparison to the Americas, there were significantly more women than men taken out of Africa to various parts of the Indian Ocean world. The ratio was approximately two to one, whereas it was roughly reversed in the Atlantic, where men were in greater demand for their labor in agriculture and mining; women were prized in the Indian Ocean as concubines—in addition to working in a range of capacities as domestic servants.
4. Finally, skin color does not necessarily identify people of African descent in the Indian Ocean world since there is a much wider spectrum of skin tones and other physical traits among the indigenous peoples (for instance, southern Indians and Sri Lankans are usually

very dark-skinned). Consequently, Africans tended to assimilate more easily. "Race," perhaps best understood as having been socially constructed in the Atlantic world to maintain political authority, does not have the same significance in the Indian Ocean world, where distinctions based on factors such as religion, ethnicity and caste were more influential.

Africans and their descendants Africanized the Indian Ocean world, contributing their cultures, talents, skills and labor, and helping shape the societies they entered and made their own. This diaspora is an epic story of soldiers, servants, sailors, merchants, mystics, mothers, musicians, linguists, dancers, divers, concubines, commanders, administrators, nurses, nannies, palace guards and bodyguards living a range of experiences across diverse societies, cultures, conditions and periods of time.

As with the Black Atlantic, no single model or experience holds for the forced or free African migrants throughout the Indian Ocean; and like the Atlantic Diaspora, the Indian Ocean Diaspora involved mass migration, albeit with a different pace and intensity. The exact number of people taken out of Africa to Arabia, the Middle East and South Asia will never be known, due to the lack of detailed records and the fact that ethnicities followed the father's line, erasing the ethnic heritage of African women's children by non-African men.

### *Names and Numbers*

Based on extant records, it may be conservatively estimated that between the first and the 20th century upward of 4 million Africans migrated out of the continent into the Indian Ocean world. Most of these migrants were forced, but many went of their own accord—as sailors, merchants or mercenaries. More accurate figures are known for the 19th century, during which scholars estimate 347,000 Africans were taken to the Arabian Peninsula, Iran and the Indian subcontinent. Their monetary value fluctuated over time and depended on age, gender, ethnicity, skills and market demands. Men and women under the age of 20 were the most sought after. Ethiopian females were prized in the Middle East for their renowned beauty, while males were in greater demand in South Asia as soldiers. Ethiopians were generally preferred over Nubians or Bantu across the Indian Ocean world.

African men, women and children—whether Akamba, Kamanga, Makua, Ndonge, Oromo, Yao or Zaramo, or any of the other dozens of peoples or nations from Mozambique in the south to Sudan in the north—have been called by a range of names. Among the most widely used (historically and presently) are Kaffir, Siddi, Habshi and Zangi—and all their variations (e.g., Caffre and Sheedi):

- *Kaffir* comes from the Arabic word *kafir*, meaning nonbeliever (a non-Muslim), but is often used in much of the Indian Ocean world (outside of East Africa) to describe any person of African descent, regardless of religion or faith.
- *Siddi* (or Sidi) is derived either from *sayyid*, an honorific title used in Arabic, originally to denote someone in the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad (possibly picked up in reference to the Arab captains referred to as such who initially brought Africans to the area of Iran/Pakistan), or from the Arabic *saydi*, meaning captive or prisoner of war.

- *Zanji* is a term used in Arabic and Farsi (the language of Iran) denoting a black person from eastern Africa, outside of Abyssinia (Ethiopia).
- *Habshi* is derived from *Al-Habash*, the Arabic term for Abyssinia.

While these and other names mostly come from Arabic and Persian, they have been incorporated into the many languages of the Indian Ocean world, including Amharic, Swahili, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati and Sinhalese, as well as into Portuguese, Dutch, French and English.

To be sure, the vast majority of enslaved Africans spent their lives as economically dependent or as marginalized in other ways in their displaced societies. Details of the lives of hundreds of thousands of concubines, servants and soldiers are little known. However, there were notable examples of individuals who rose to positions of significant authority as either enslaved or free: Bilal ibn Rabah, the muezzin and companion of the Prophet Muhammad; the merchant and Muslim saint Bava Gor; and the military commander Malik Ambar are among the best known.

Whether named or nameless, these Africans and their descendants form the multilayered, multicolored fabric comprising the African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean world.

## EAST AFRICA

Beginning in the eighth century Arabs and Bantu-speaking Africans created an Afro-Arab culture along the Swahili coast (*swahil* is the plural form of the Arabic word *sahil*, meaning shore). Nearly 40 trading towns, mostly concentrated in Tanzania and Kenya—including Zanzibar, Lamu and Pemba (Tanzania), Malindi (Kenya) and Mogadishu (Somalia)—were developed along this coast where Arab, Persian, Indian and Chinese merchants made their way, driven by the force of the monsoons and the search for profits. The seasonal trade winds enabled them to carry goods from East Africa to South Asia—and points in between—from April to September and then return between November and February. Over time, the ships' captains and crews became increasingly integrated into the maritime communities that hosted them in the ports that dotted the coastlines of the Indian Ocean.

These seafaring and trading networks helped create and disseminate new languages, ideas, syncretic religious practices, technologies, people and goods carried from the Swahili Coast to southern Arabia, southern Iran and Pakistan, and western India. Africans—as sailors, merchants and captives—became part of each of these coastlines, developing communities of their own. Language became a powerful indicator of the extent to which peoples were intermingled not only on the coasts but also deep into the interior. By the 19th century, Swahili had become the *lingua franca* as far inland as the Central African Lake District and parts of eastern Congo.

East Africans who arrived in the Indian subcontinent aboard the ubiquitous dhows almost always stopped in Yemen before continuing on to South Asia, where they disembarked at the western Indian ports of Kutch, Surat and, later, Bombay. Others carried on to Madras on the eastern side of India, Colombo and Galle in Sri Lanka—from where other ships transported them to the Far East.

The demand for slave labor at times drew fierce competition between Arabs and East Indians. Such rivalry accelerated with the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean region in the late

15th century and led to increased kidnappings of Africans from the interior of the continent (extending west of Lake Tanganyika), with ever-greater numbers of men, women and children being dispersed across the Indian Ocean world.

### *Ethiopia*

The presence of Ethiopians, or Abyssinians, across the Indian Ocean world appears early in the archival and archeological record. The anonymous first-century Greek author of the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* notes commercial contact between East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent. Trade, however, was often mixed with imperial expansion. During the fourth century armies from Ethiopia invaded the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula and occupied Yemen from 335 to 370.

The Persian and Byzantine historians Muhammed ibn Jariri al-Tabari and Procopius of Caesarea indicate that between 532 and 535 the Ethiopian general Abraha al-Ashram, a Christian, seized the throne of the Himyarite kingdom and ruled as the king of Saba for some 35 years. His sons by a Yemeni woman ensured that an African presence in Arabia remained following his death in 570.

The archeological record verifies that commercial contacts between Ethiopia and South Asia had been well established in the ancient world. Indian figurines were imported into Ethiopia as early as the third century BCE; and during the first century CE the Greek observer Pliny the Elder described Barygasa (Baruch) in Gujarat, on the western coast of India, as an Ethiopian town. More than 100 gold coins dating to approximately 230 found in Dabra Damo, northern Ethiopia, have been identified as Kushana (from the Kush region between Pakistan and Afghanistan).

Many of the captives in Ethiopia were Oromo, who filled the markets at Gondar and Gallabar in the northwest. Oromo chiefs often acted as dealers, supplying Christian Oromo to Muslim markets. During the 16th century, a Dutch traveler noted that enslaved Christian Ethiopians could be recognized by the cross-shaped marks on their faces—burns made upon baptism to forever mark their religious identity, if not faith. Up to 500 Oromo were reportedly sold in a single day at Gallabar alone.

Another observer, the Italian traveler Ludovico di Varthema—the first non-Muslim European to enter Mecca—noted at the turn of the 16th century how Ethiopian soldiers were taken by the "Moors" (i.e., Muslims) to Zeila on the Gulf of Aden and from there "carried into Persia, Arabia Felix [southern Arabia] and to Mecca, Cairo and into India." Some of these Ethiopians were paid mercenaries, but most were slave-soldiers being transported as a military force by Arabs to various parts of the Indian Ocean.

Over the course of many centuries Ethiopians would appear repeatedly in the historical record. Some were quite notable: in the seventh century, Bilal ibn Rabah, the son of an enslaved Abyssinian woman and Islam's first muezzin (the person who calls Muslims to prayer); in the 14th century, Bava Gor, a merchant in the agate trade and a highly venerated Sufi *pir* (Muslim spiritual master); and in the early 17th century, Malik Ambar, a Muslim general in India's Deccan, under whose command were nearly 8,000 soldiers, including several thousand fellow Habshi. In 1530, during the Portuguese occupation, Sayf al-Mulk Miftah, the governor of Daman

on the coast of Ahmednagar in western India, was described as an Ethiopian who commanded a force of 4,000 Habshi soldiers. In addition to serving in military roles, Ethiopians continued to trade directly with outlying ports in the Indian Ocean. In the 16th century, the Portuguese traveler Tomé Pires noted that Ethiopian merchants were trading as far away as Malacca in Malaysia.

Ethiopians were also part of crews that crisscrossed the Indian Ocean. Some navigated between Hormuz in southern Iran and Goa and Bengal in India, while others sailed to Malaysia, and a few went to China and Japan with the Portuguese. Along the western coast of India, Ethiopians built a chain of fortifications, controlling sea access from Daman, in the north, down to the island of Janjira, south of Bombay. There, beginning in the early 17th century, Habshi sailors turned rulers established a royal lineage that reigned for nearly 300 years.

### *Zanzibar*

Sustained commercial contact between Muslim Arabs and Persians down to Tanzania and the island of Zanzibar began in the 10th century. With greater commercial contact came religious conversion to Islam. As elsewhere in East Africa, Muslim conversion among Africans grew first along the trade routes, followed by urban centers, and only much later in the countryside. Merchants and later sultans and lower-level sheiks along the East African coast were instrumental in spreading Islam through their financial support for the construction of mosques and Muslim scholarship. They lent their support both for the prestige increasingly associated with patronizing Islamic religious institutions and scholarship and to deepen commercial contacts with Muslims in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. In exchange for imports such as cotton cloth from India, cowry shells from the Maldives, and Chinese porcelain, East Africans exported gold, ivory, coconut oil, mangrove poles (for construction), and enslaved men, women and children.

For centuries slave trading thrived along the East African coast. However, during the 19th century Zanzibar became the principal port along the coast for the mass distribution of captive Africans from the interior. Most came from the area of Lake Nyasa (today Lake Malawi). Arab and Swahili traders descended into this region, traveling down the Shire River, kidnapping or purchasing men, women and children who had been captured through war and raiding. People from dozens of ethnicities were then brought to Zanzibar, Kilwa and Pemba where they awaited transport.

Precise numbers are not known, but there are some indications. For instance, in 1830, the sultan of Zanzibar claimed dues on approximately 37,000 enslaved men, women and children. As late as 1859 approximately 20,000 people were being funneled through the island. They were then shipped to the island of Socotra and to Aden in Yemen before being taken to ports across the Arabian Sea, landing in Sindh (Pakistan) and Gujarat (India). Thousands of Indian merchants and their kin eventually settled in East Africa, some becoming large slaveholders. Following a tradition of enslavement among Hindus going back 4,000 years, Bania Indians (Hindus of the largely merchant caste) and Gujarati traders in Zanzibar reportedly owned some 6,000 Africans.

### *Cairo*



Cairo was a major crossroad for Muslim West Africans on their way to Mecca to perform the hajj (pilgrimage). Perhaps the most famous pilgrim was the 14th-century emperor of Mali, Mansa Musa. In 1324, with an entourage said to be of 60,000 people—including 20,000 enslaved subjects—dozens of camels laden with gold dust, drums beating, and in full regalia, the emperor journeyed to Arabia, passing through Egypt. According to chroniclers, while in Cairo, Mansa Musa infused so much gold into the local economy through his purchases and gift-giving that the price of gold was devalued in the city for years thereafter. On his way back from the hajj, the emperor brought back some of the leading artists, scholars and architects of the Muslim world. Mansa Musa's journey made a lasting impression; more than 50 years later, in their *Atlas Catalán*, two Mallorcan Sephardic Jews, Abraham Cresques and his son Jehuda, vividly depicted the West African emperor seated on a throne with a gold orb in one hand and a staff in the other.

But Cairo was also one of the starting points of the dispersion of Africans. The largest city in Africa at the time, its slave markets were among the largest in the continent, surpassing Zanzibar's. For centuries, caravans of several thousand men, women and children from Dar-Fur (Darfur, Sudan) regularly arrived in the city. From there many captives were sent to the Maghreb in the western part of North Africa, across the Mediterranean, and to Ottoman Turkey. Many, however, remained in Egypt, where they served in military capacities.

Sub-Saharan African captives were introduced into Egypt in 870 by the Tulunid ruler Ahmed ibn Tulun, who held upward of 24,000 white and 45,000 black slaves. None of the Africans reached the highest echelons of power, but in the next century a Nubian eunuch, Abu 'l-Misk Kafur, briefly ruled Egypt on behalf of the Ilkshidid dynasty (935-969). The Ilkshidid ruler Muhammed ibn Tughi had bought Kafur and, recognizing his talents and loyalty, gave him increasing and substantial administrative and military authority. Among Kafur's special tasks was serving as tutor to Tughi's two sons. When Tughi died in 946, Kafur became regent to each of the sons. After the death of one son, he assumed the position of de facto ruler but died less than three years later.

The succeeding Fatimid dynasty, which ruled Egypt from 969 to 1171, continued the tradition of drawing on soldiers from sub-Saharan Africa. The Fatimids raised several black battalions. But in 1146 some 500 enslaved Africans mounted on the Arabian horses under their care briefly fled for their freedom. The rebels even set up their own state on the Lower Nile until they were crushed by military force.

Sub-Saharan Africans continued to arrive in Cairo. In the 1570s a Frenchman visiting Egypt found "many thousands" in the slave market; in the 1660s another European eyewitness reported seeing between 800 and 1,000 Africans for sale; and in 1796 a British traveler reported up to 5,000 Africans being transported up from Dar Fur. The slave trade continued until the end of the 19th century.

### *Madagascar and the Mascarenes*

The slave trade across the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Indian subcontinent accelerated from the 18th through the 19th centuries because of a combination of factors: more efficiently organized states in East Africa that had an active interest in promoting it; the transportation of people from Mozambique to Brazil by the Portuguese; the establishment by Omani Arabs of

plantations at Zanzibar and Pemba; and the introduction of African captives into the island of Madagascar by the French.

People from Madagascar and those sent there from continental Africa were transported to southern Iran during the 19th century. A sizable black population formed at Hormuz, comprising Malagasy and mainland Africans who fused cultures and traditions into a unique culture of their own.

During the second half of the 17th century, European colonial powers established labor-intensive plantations in the Mascarenes, an archipelago to the east of Madagascar. Rival Portuguese, Dutch, British and French colonizers fought for control. Ultimately, the French took hold of the archipelago, including Ile de France (Mauritius)—whose first two successful settlers were maroons who survived the initial Dutch efforts at settlement—Ile Bourbon (Reunion) and Sechelles (the Seychelles). French victory, and the subsequent development of plantation agriculture requiring extensive labor, prompted the introduction of men and women from East Africa (via Kilwa in Tanzania), who were joined by indentured servants from Asia to work on the sugar and coffee plantations that greatly enriched the French and their Indian Ocean trading partners.

As the plantation system grew in the Mascarenes, the character of these islands began to more closely resemble the distant islands of the West Indies than the islands of the Indian Ocean, prompting some scholars to describe them as a "second Caribbean." Today fully one-fifth of all Mauritians (approximately 200,000 out of a total population of 1 million) are estimated to be of African descent.

## ARABIAN PENINSULA

Arabs dominated the slave trade in the Indian Ocean from the sixth century until the arrival, in the late 15th century, of the Portuguese, who initially worked within the largely Muslim-run maritime trading system before trying to control the major ports of the Indian Ocean. African men were often crew members on Arab ships, and they would also join the crews of the Portuguese, who increasingly relied on black labor in their maritime expansion. Women were regularly engaged in a variety of tasks, serving as domestics, cooks, cleaners, nurses and washerwomen; others performed as musicians, dancers and singers. Schools in Medina (as well as in the Muslim seats of power at Baghdad and as far away as Cordoba in Spain) trained them in the arts. Many women, however, served as concubines, and with their children became members of Arab families.

Under Islamic law and its guiding principles (sharia), once a concubine bore a child, she could not be sold or given away; the child was free and automatically became part of the slaveholder's household. Concubines often married their owners, binding them further, but upon their husbands' deaths, they were emancipated. The social and legal tradition within Islam of children not following the status of their mothers, and of a child's ethnicity being determined by that of the father, accelerated the process of assimilation of the Africans, who when converting to Islam adopted Arabic names (making it difficult to trace African heritage in historical records by name alone). This absorption of Africans into the kin systems of indigenous Muslim Arab, Persian or



Indian slaveholders helps account for much of the invisibility in the historical written record of men and women of African descent in the Indian Ocean world.

### *Western Arabia*

Starting in pre-Islamic times, Arabs traded Africans at Mecca, the crossroad for many of the caravan routes in the Arabian Peninsula. Mecca—with Medina one of the two holiest sites for Muslims—was a major slave market, and it was where an emancipated Habshi, Bilal ibn Rabah, came to prominence.

According to the Hadith (traditions of the Prophet and his Companions), among Muhammad's earliest converts was Bilal, the "son of an Abyssinian slave-girl," who became a trusted companion of the Prophet. Bilal Al-Habash (the Ethiopian), as he was also known, was described as tall and dark, with lean features. He was enslaved by Umayyah ibn Khalaf, who violently opposed Muhammad and his teachings of a single god. When Bilal converted, Ibn Khalaf tortured him in an effort to get him to recant his faith. Having heard of Bilal's tenacity, Abu Bakr (later Sunni Islam's first caliph) purchased and emancipated him. Muhammad asked Bilal, who was known to have a powerful, melodic voice, to serve as the community's first muezzin.

Bilal, whose name is prevalent among Muslim men on the Horn of Africa, went on to fight alongside the Prophet in the most critical battles during the earliest days of Islam. He lived for a time in Basra, the major port city of southern Iraq, before returning to Arabia. The high esteem in which Muslims in the Indian Ocean world hold Bilal can be seen in the Persian Gulf, where musical performances by men and women of African descent pay homage to him. In Pakistan, songs of religious devotion—including by Muslims of non-African descent—praise him; and in Africa and Turkey muezzin guilds venerate the founder of their religious art form. Bilal's "song" continues to be heard across the entire *ummah*, the global Muslim community.

With the rise of Islam, captives were increasingly sought in areas outside the frontiers of Muslim-held lands, since, as one of the conditions set by sharia, Muslims could not theoretically enslave a fellow Muslim—a rule that was regularly broken. Although "The freeing of the slave" is implored in the Quran (Sura *Al-Balad* [The City] 90:13) as the righteous path, it was not required; and Islamic law made clear that slaves could be purchased and sold, with some conditions attached. Specifically, it was not permitted to take people who had been kidnapped, sold by parents, or obtained through wars for political expansion—only in wars of self-defense. These rules were easily circumvented in practice, and none of the major legal schools within Islam opposed slavery on Qur'anic grounds.

Ironically, enslaved Africans often wielded greater authority over free Muslims, particularly eunuchs who served in the courts at Mecca and Medina, some becoming keepers of the Kaaba (the site towards which all Muslims pray.) One of their primary roles was as intermediaries in harems, gatekeepers and communicators between the inside and outside worlds of these enclosed societies. But even with the kind of authority eunuchs, slave soldiers or administrators wielded, they remained in bondage and could not, for instance, perform the hajj on their own. Still, they expressed themselves in their own unique ways: African Muslims in Mecca were seen well into the 19th century celebrating their ancestry with performances that involved two or more people

dancing with long sticks and moving as if in combat in a manner reminiscent of the Afro-Brazilian *capoeira*.

During the late 19th century tens of thousands of African captives were shipped up the Red Sea for sale to other parts of the Middle East following the annual pilgrimages to Mecca. They were sold at Jeddah and Mecca, or were otherwise exchanged for goods, including steel weapons from Damascus, turquoise or carpets from Persia, or silks from China. The London-based Anti-Slavery Reporter noted that up to 25,000 people were sold or exchanged in Mecca in 1878; a decade later an estimated 8,000 Ethiopians were still being traded at the holy city. Slavery was not officially abolished in Saudi Arabia until 1962.

### *Yemen and Oman*

The ancestors of the Yemeni of African descent arrived in several waves. The Akhdam, Hajur and Subians descend from Ethiopian conquerors, notably Abraha al-Ashram, who settled in Yemen between the third and sixth centuries. Subsequently, their descendants worked as agricultural laborers and fishermen. They were joined by Somalis, Eritreans and other Ethiopians, who traded in Aden and remained there. Finally, forced migrants from Mozambique and the Swahili coast were brought to perform a range of labor in the region. Indian-bound ships on their way back from Mozambique and the Swahili coast transported captives to Mocha (a major port on the Red Sea in western Yemen). Only a minority of these Africans actually remained in Yemen; most only passed through on their way to Oman, Iran, Iraq and India.

Africans worked on coffee plantations (Mocha became the leading center for the export of *Coffea arabica*—the world's coffee bean source), in harbors, as divers in pearl fisheries, and as drummers on dhows, maintaining the rhythm of work. African cultural influences are particularly prominent in the music of Aden and the Hadramaut (on the southern coast). Instruments, including the *zamzamiya*, a type of harp resembling the *sunsumia* played in Zanzibar, as well as the music of the Tihamah (a coastal region of Arabia on the Red Sea), where drumming and dancing are closely tied, are all reminiscent of East Africa in the juxtaposition of opposing rhythms, polyrhythm, singing in thirds, and the use of call and response.

Today, the "black Yemeni," as they are referred to locally, are marginalized. Many of the now Muslim descendants of the once Christian Ethiopian conquerors of southern Arabia, along with other people of African origin, are relegated to performing the most menial jobs, facing poverty and social isolation. The 3,000 people comprising the Akhdam community in the district of Mahwa Dar Salm, south of the capital Sanaa, live in slumlike conditions, with virtually no access to electricity, running water or schools.

Omani Arabs settled on the Makran coast of southern Iran and Pakistan (Sindh and Baluchistan) as early as the third century, and while the area was never part of the Omani empire, it was an integral part of the trading route connecting East African ports with Muscat, the Omani capital, and the other slave trading ports of the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and western India.

In 1970, Oman was the last nation to abolish slavery in the Indian Ocean world. Theoretically all Omanis have equal access to education as well as to government positions; however, Afro-

Omanis continue to be treated as second-class citizens. They work the most menial jobs and live in substandard conditions relative to the rest of the population.

In Oman, as was the case across much of the Persian Gulf, enslaved Africans and their descendants perform *tanburah*. This tradition of music and dance is named after the six-string lyre (tanburah), an instrument used in many rituals for curing illnesses caused by spirit possession (zar), for mourning the dead, or for celebrating weddings. Although there are variations across the region, tanburah generally consist of men or women dancing in rows accompanied by the lyre, several drums and a rattle belt; they respond to a person leading the song in chorus (although singing is not systematic). These ceremonies can last for hours and are performed over a number of consecutive days until the person possessed by a *jinn* (evil spirit) is cured. Several rituals, such as the *nouba* (derived from Nubia), have been traced directly to Ethiopia and Sudan. They include songs in African languages that are now unintelligible to their modern practitioners.

## PERSIAN GULF

### *Southern Iraq*

As early as the fifth century Arabs brought Africans to southern Iraq to work their date plantations and salt marshes. But not all the enslaved were of African origin; some were white, namely Circassians and Georgians from the Caucasus. With the growth of salt mining in the area of Basra, however, the African presence increased throughout the Gulf Coast of Iran and led to a series of violent uprisings beginning in the seventh century and culminating with the Zanj rebellion.

During the late ninth century tens of thousands of enslaved Africans from the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and other parts of Eastern Africa (Nubians and Bantu), as well as non-Africans—groups that were all largely employed in the salt marshes surrounding Basra—took up arms against the Abbasid slaveholders. Their revolt was not the first: an enslaved black man, Rabah Shir Zanjī (the "Lion of the Zanj"), had led a rebellion in Basra in 694-695. Armed revolts continued to erupt, and the Zanj rebellion was of unprecedented scale.

Led by the free Persian 'Alī ibn Muḥammad, the bulk of rebel soldiers were African in origin. The uprising led to the creation of a new government in southern Iraq. In defiance to the Abbasid caliphate, the black rebels, taking over several cities, organized their own state with its own standing army, and even minted coins. The rebellion-turned-state lasted 14 years until the Zanj forces were overwhelmed by the Abbasid army. The Zanj's military skills and prowess spurred the interest of Muslim rulers who for centuries thereafter recruited Africans into their own armed forces.

### *Southern Iran*

Africans in southern Iran appear sporadically in the historical record until the 17th century. By that time, the evidence of those serving in military capacities becomes more regular. In 1622, Africans helped the Portuguese during an Anglo-Persian attack at Hormuz. Enslaved Bantu threw firebombs from their ramparts onto English and Persian forces who were trying to gain access to the strategically located fortress on the Gulf Coast. Although the Portuguese lost

Hormuz, the record of Africans defending them remains. Africans also defended the interests of the Dutch and British, as well as of indigenous rulers.

People from Eastern Africa were brought to Khuzistan in southwestern Iran to work in sugarcane plantations. African males were sometimes employed in households as nurses; and some commanded a certain degree of respect for teaching a range of subjects, including science and good manners, to the children of nobility. Females were employed as wet nurses and nannies. Many also served as concubines; under Islamic law their own children, called *khanazad* (house-born), became members of the slaveholder's family.

Africans also served as minstrels, stone breakers, woodcutters and bodyguards, and worked in royal courts. Shah Sultan Husayn, on visiting the markets at Isfahan, purportedly brought some 200 eunuchs as part of his retinue, half of whom were black. Some Africans rose to positions of authority during the early 18th century. In 1717 an African named Ya'qub Sultan became the governor of Bandar 'Abbas, the principal port serving central and southern Iran.

Countless African boys were castrated as they were sold into slavery; only a minority survived the operation (most bleeding to death or dying from complications). Those who became *ghulams*—soldiers and bodyguards of princes—were a select group, and some gained close access to the highest levels of Persian society. In 1821, the African Ali Akbar Khan served as the commander of the ghulams at the court of the Shiraz prince. As in other parts of the Middle East, eunuchs were particularly valued as harem guards.

Although Africans were brought to Iran over the course of several centuries, as elsewhere in the western part of the Indian Ocean world, the number increased during the 19th century as the trade in Georgians and Circassians became limited in 1828 due to the Russian military victory in northern Iran and the treaty that followed. A sharp rise ensued in the enslavement of fellow Persians—in particular, Baluchis and Khorasanis—and a renewed demand for Africans.

Lingah, Bushehr, Bandar 'Abbas and Qeshm Island became the major slave trading ports for Africans during this period. In 1842, more than 1,200 Africans disembarked, in addition to hundreds of men and women bought and brought by Iranian pilgrims on their return from Mecca and Karbala (a holy site for Shia Muslims). Along the coast, Hormuz had a sizable African population, coming mainly from Madagascar.

Resistance to slavery among Afro-Iranians, largely in the form of flight, rose as abolitionists began to apply pressure from within and from outside Iran. Instances of marronage grew in the early 20th century; and it was not until that time that the Gunabadi, a group of the Ni'matullahi Sufi order, called for emancipation by issuing a fatwa.

After slavery was abolished in 1928, Africans and their descendants formed their own distinct communities, where they continue to celebrate and commemorate their heritage through music, dance, and passing along their oral history. The settlements of the descendants of the people who mostly arrived in the 19th century may be seen along the Gulf Coast today. They include Zanjabad and Deh-Zanjan in Baluchistan and Kerman Province, as well as a black community

near Bandar 'Abbas comprising Africans who worked as either sailors or agricultural workers on date plantations.

As in Oman, Dubai and Kuwait, Africans and their descendants in Iran practiced spirit possession (*zar*). Additionally, they had ceremonies, such as *liwat*, *gowa* and *al-nuban*, serving specific purposes—almost always having to do with driving out or appeasing spirits, usually African, that traveled with the wind. In southern Iran, spirits in general are referred to as *pepe* (from *pepo* in Swahili); some are called *mature* (from *matari* in Swahili); yet others denote African origins further inland, such as *chinyase* (from Cinyase, the language spoken by the Nyasa in southern Malawi).

## SOUTH ASIA

### *Pakistan*

Many of the Africans brought into the Indian subcontinent entered through the ports of Baluchistan and Sindh, where they worked as dockworkers, horse-keepers, domestic servants, agricultural workers, nurses, palanquin carriers and apprentices to blacksmiths and carpenters. In 1851, the linguist Sir Richard Burton, who served in the British Army in Sindh, noted how up to 700 Bambasi, Habshi and Zangibari—all Africans—were imported annually into neighboring Baluchistan. Females were in greater demand and were priced at around 50 pounds, while children were bartered for grain, cloth and other goods. Much of the vocabulary used by the Afro-Sindhi descendants of these migrants is a modified Swahili. For instance, the word for shield in Swahili, *ngao*, is *gao* among the Afro-Sindhi; the word for moon (or one month) in Swahili, *mwesi*, is *moesi* in Afro-Sindhi.

Pakistan has the most people of African descent in South Asia. It has been estimated that at least a quarter of the total population of the Makran coast is of African ancestry—that is, at least 250,000 people living on the southern coast of Pakistan, which overlaps with southeastern Iran, can claim East African descent. Beginning in 1650 Oman traded more heavily with the Lamu archipelago on the Swahili coast and transported Africans to the Makran coast. As a result, today many Pakistani of African descent are referred to as Makrani, whether or not they live there. On the coast they are also variously referred to as *dada*, *sheedi* and *syah* (all meaning black), or alternatively, *gulam* (slave) or *naukar* (servant). The children of Sindhi Muslim men and *sidiyani* (female Africans) are called *gaddo*—as in half-caste. The population geneticist Lluís Quintana-Murci of the Pasteur Institute in Paris found that more than 40 percent of the maternal gene pool of the Makrani is of African origin.

"Mombasa Street" and "Sheedi Village" in Karachi speak to the African presence in modern-day Pakistan. The predominantly Muslim Afro-Pakistani community in Karachi continues to celebrate the Manghopir festival, in honor of the Sufi saint Mangho Haji Syed Sakhi Sultan. Outside the main shrine in Karachi, there is a pond with crocodiles that are served specially prepared food. The crocodiles, which were venerated by Hindus before the advent of Islam and are also regarded with esteem by Africans, have become an integral part of the shrine. Although the Sheedis no longer understand all the words of the songs they sing, they pass along this tradition to succeeding generations.

Maritime activities on the Pakistani Makran coast influenced the music of Afro-Baluchis, many of whom were seafarers who maintained contacts with eastern and northeastern Africa through the middle of the 20th century. There are distinct similarities between the Afro-Pakistani drumming and singing performances called *laywa* in the Makran and those called *lewa* in coastal Oman—songs consisting of Swahili words and references to both East Africa and the sea.

### *India*

The history of India's Africans, called Siddis, is the best known in the region—largely because of the documentation on those who rose to high positions as military commanders.

African ivory was the most sought-after commodity among Indian merchants; captives would carry it to the East African coast, where both the individuals and the ivory were sold, loaded onto dhows, and transported to the ports of southern Arabia. From there they would continue across the Arabian Sea, stopping along the Makran coast, before continuing on to western India. Given India's large population, its indigenous slaves, and a caste system among Hindus in which most labor-intensive tasks were traditionally performed by specific groups, African males were employed in very specialized jobs, almost always having to do with some aspect of security—as soldiers, palace guards, or personal bodyguards. They were generally deemed more trustworthy than indigenous people to serve in those capacities, but in a number of cases Africans rebelled against their Muslim or Hindu rulers. During the 15th and 16th centuries, African slave-soldiers seized power in the Bengal sultanate, parts of the Deccan, and the sultanate of Gujarat. However, several centuries before these rebellions, an Abyssinian attained high rank in alliance with the female ruler of Delhi.

In 1236 an Abyssinian named Jalal-ud-din Yakut served in the important imperial post of master of the royal stable, an honor conferred by the Delhi sultana Raziya. In India, where Africans were known for their equestrian skills and their ability to tame wild horses, they served in the cavalry, unlike in the Middle East, where they were limited to service in the infantry. Yakut, a skilled soldier and horseman, was also a political ally of Raziya during her fight for control of the throne. Raziya's father, the Turkish ruler Iltutmish, who had conquered much of northern India, had named her as his successor, but Raziya's brother opposed her. She ruled for four years, before both she and Yakut were killed—on the run and in battle.

A century later, the Moroccan jurist and explorer Ibn Battuta recorded that during his stay in India from 1333 to 1343 the governor of Allahpur (north of Delhi) was an African named Badr, technically enslaved to the Rajah of Dholpur. In India as elsewhere in the Indian Ocean region, the category "slave" was much more elastic than in the Atlantic world, where enslaved Africans had far less opportunity for upward mobility under European colonial rule and in the new republics of the Americas.

### *Gujarat*

Africans have been part of the western state of Gujarat since at least the first century, when the town of Barygasa (Baruch today) was considered an Ethiopian town, peopled by merchants from East Africa. Oral history recounted by Afro-Gujaratis mentions how their ancestors also served as bodyguards in the palaces of Hindu kings. Among their functions: to taste the Maharajah's food to protect against attempted poisoning.

The Mughals, a Muslim imperial power in northern India from the early 16th century through the early 19th, relied on African soldiers and sailors. In 1572, when the Mughal Emperor Akbar entered Gujarat, he was reportedly protected by 700 armed Habshi on horseback. African soldiers and sailors also received annual payment for defending Mughal subjects from piracy at sea and attacks on land. Between the 16th and 18th centuries a Habshi naval force was based in Surat, the principal port in Gujarat, and African sailors accompanied pilgrims to Mecca, offering protection on the high seas. Such Habshi naval protection even predated Mughal rule. Ibn Battuta noted in the mid-14th century the legendary bravery of Habshi soldiers and sailors. Ibn Battuta traveled with 50 Abyssinians on a ship to protect against pirate attacks; he called them "the guarantors of safety on the Indian Ocean." While boarding a Chinese junk at Calicut in south India, he observed Abyssinians carrying javelins and swords and others with drums and bugles, indicating the use of Africans on ships traveling to the Far East.

Gujarati Siddis distinguish themselves from others in India by their strong Sufi practices, mostly centering on the African pir Bava Gor, the most revered Sufi among people of African descent in South Asia. Bava Gor, originally named Siddi Mubarak Nob, came from East Africa during the 14th century and made Ratanpur, in Gujarat, his home. The African became the patron saint of the agate bead industry, having been credited for augmenting the trade in the quartz stone between East Africa, the Persian Gulf, and India. Before arriving in India, Bava Gor spent time in Mecca and the area of Basra in lower Iraq, where he studied with Sufis of the Rifa'i order, who gave him the honorific title Baba Ghaur, meaning "master of deep meditation" in Arabic.

According to one oral tradition, Bava Gor's sister, Mai Misra, who developed her own Sufi following, came to India to vanquish a demoness; meanwhile, her brother vanquished the demon Rakshisha of Hindu mythology. This legend speaks to the historic tensions involving the coming of Islam to the Indian subcontinent and the transformation of Hindu society. Misra, whose name is derived from *misr* (Arabic for northeast Africa), is particularly venerated for her powers of fertility. Respect for her may be seen in the coconut rattles used by the Siddis that bear her name. In Gujarat, as well as other parts of India, Siddis play the *malunga*, a single-stringed braced musical bow, found in many East African communities (and as far away as Brazil, where it is called *berimbau*). The hand that holds the malunga will also hold the *mai misra* rattle below, which is attached to a gourd resonator to amplify the instrument.

Many Siddis in Gujarat are known for performing sacred music as wandering *fakirs* (Sufi ascetics) in praise of Bava Gor and other saints. They perform *goma* (or *dhamal*), a word deriving from the Swahili *ngoma* (drum and dance), in celebration of *urs*, commemorating Muslim saints, sometimes over the course of several days. They also perform at weddings and birthdays and, in previous times, at celebrations of noble courts.

Today Bava Gor shrines are located along the eastern parts of the Indian subcontinent—from the area of Sindh down to Mumbai. They are often associated with the agate trade and are visited not only by Muslims of various backgrounds but also by Zoroastrians, Christians, and Hindus. In Gujarat, the shrines were a former refuge for runaway Africans and, later, for free Siddis looking for a space where they could congregate. One contemporary follower of Bava Gor, Sidi Asoo Appa, served as caretaker of a shrine in Mumbai. Her grandfather had been recruited from East



Africa into the army of the Nizam of Hyderabad, and her father, Abdul Rasak Sidi Bilal, was a singer of *qawwali* (songs of Muslim devotional praise).

While in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf Coast region African musical and dance traditions have continued in the form of spirit possession performances (*zar* and *tanburah*), in South Asia African traditions largely revolve around the veneration of Sufi pirs, such as Bava Gor in Gujarat or Shaikh Najib in the Maldives. In both areas, references to the ocean and seafaring figure prominently with lyrics from East Africa. In the Gujarati port city of Diu—where in 1838 a chronicler estimated that up to 6 percent of the population was Siddi—many Swahili words are found in the languages spoken today by the men and women of African descent.

### *Bengal and Deccan*

Several kings in Bengal, in east India, secured enslaved African soldiers to protect and expand their kingdoms. From 1460 to 1481, the sultan of Bengal, Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah, had 8,000 Africans in his army, some of whom held high command. Another king, Habesh Khan, was overthrown in 1490 by one of his African guardsmen, Sidi Badr, who seized the throne for himself and ruled for three years as Shams-ud-din Abu Nasr Musaffar Shah. Five thousand of his 30,000 soldiers were Habshi. Sidi Badr was overthrown, and Africans in Bengal, especially those in high command, were expelled, as they were then seen as posing a threat to indigenous Indian rulers. Many of these Africans, both rank-and-file soldiers and commanders with experience, went either to the five Muslim sultanates of the Deccan or to Gujarat, where local rulers employed them as mercenaries—continuing the military contributions of Africans in India.

Malik Ambar, who became famous in the Deccan, is the best known of the Africans who seized power in India. With several surviving paintings of him accompanied by written documentation, his story is among the most detailed of the historical Habshis. Born in southern Ethiopia in the mid-16th century, Ambar was enslaved as a young man and taken to Mocha in Yemen, where he converted to Islam. Noted for his intellectual abilities, he was educated in finance and administration by his owners in western Arabia before being taken to Baghdad and then arriving in central India's Deccan.

Ambar's recognized abilities brought him increasing responsibilities, including military authority. Under the minister of the king of Ahmadnagar, Ambar commanded both Indian and Habshi soldiers. By the turn of the 17th century, however, he rebelled and formed his own army of 150 men, which he eventually grew to 10,000 cavalry and infantrymen, many of whom were Africans. In 1610, an English merchant, William Finch, writing from near Ahmadnagar (where Ambar had become peshwa, or regent minister), noted that the Habshi general commanded "some ten thousand of his own [caste], all brave souldiers, and som[e] forty thousand Deccanees." The runaway had become a mercenary general with a mobile armed force. Over the next two decades he fought for various rulers in the Deccan and fended off the incursions of the Mughal emperor Akbar and his successor Jahangir, each of whom attempted but failed to take control of the region.

By 1616 Ambar not only commanded a powerful cavalry force that used British artillery, but was successfully cutting off Mughal supply lines through his naval alliance with the Siddi rulers of Janjira. Over the course of his campaigns against the Mughals, he continued to infuse his army

with Habshi soldiers, whom he trained, provided with an education in the Quran, and used for his private guard.

Ambar sought to integrate his family into the indigenous royalty and nobility. His daughter was brought into the royal household of the Nizam Shahi dynasty as the wife of Sultan Murtaza II; and his son, Fateh Khan, married the daughter of one of the most powerful nobles of the land, Yakut Khan, a free Habshi. Ambar, a ruler unto himself, established the city of Khadki in which he oversaw the construction of canals, an irrigation system, mosques, schools, tombs and a palace. He also distinguished himself for his religious tolerance. He granted land to Hindus, patronized Hindu scholars, and appointed Brahmins as officials and tax collectors. When the Habshi ruler died in 1626, he left one of the most impressive legacies of any ruler in the Deccan.

The Mughals drew upon the tradition and practice of using African soldiers and sailors for protection, and Siddi captains were appointed admirals of their fleet. Some Siddis of the sea were their own masters, settling in the island fort of Janjira (south of Mumbai) and creating a string of fortifications along the coast. The island of Janjira (from *jazeera*, island or peninsula in Arabic) was a formidable fortress entirely surrounded by large walls with 22 rounded bastions. It was also known as Habsan (from Habsha, Ethiopia). The first African to be posted at Janjira was Sidi Ambar Sainak ("The Little," to distinguish him from Malik Ambar), appointed by Malik Ambar in 1617.

The rulers of Janjira, who formed their own royal lineage, remained undefeated for almost 300 years. Not until 1870 were the British—their Bombay garrison included more than 600 Africans in 1760—able to finally defeat the Siddis of Janjira. By that time, they had also become integrated with mainland Indian royalty.

### Goa

Beginning in 1510, among the key Portuguese colonial enclaves in the Indian Ocean world was Goa, located on the western coast of India. West-Central Africans from Angola, Atlantic Africans from Brazil and East Africans from Mozambique—all Portuguese colonies—formed the bulk of the African presence in Goa. Some were sold to other Europeans. For example, on October 15, 1777, the French East India Company asked its brokers the Mhamay family (Goa natives) for 200 adult men, 100 women and 100 boys. The request was fulfilled from a recently arrived ship from Mozambique that had brought 700 Africans. About a decade later the Mhamays were still involved in slave trading. Among the hundreds of African men they sold were five whose Christian names are recorded as Alberto, Ignacio, Januario, Joao and Joaquim—sold for 822 Bombay rupees. Such Christianized names assumed by Africans, like assumed Muslim (Arabic) names, would obscure their African origins.

From the 16th through the 19th century, enslaved Africans from Goa fled for refuge to neighboring Karnataka, but in the wake of the major uprising against British rule in India in 1857 an African named Siddi Bastian led a group of fellow Siddis and Kanarese (indigenous Indians from Karnataka) in a sustained campaign against European forces. For almost two years maroons under Bastian's command looted and burned British and Portuguese settlements along the border of Goa.

### *Hyderabad*

In the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh, African soldiers called *Chaush* (derived from Ottoman military nomenclature) served in the army and cavalry of the Nizam-ul-Mulk (the title of the sovereign of the state). From at least the mid-19th century through 1948, various Nizams kept 300 soldiers serving as their personal guards stationed in a compound in Hyderabad. These Africans, from diverse origins, were organized into two regiments, the African Bodyguard and the African Cavalry Guard. The last surviving guardsman, Feroz bins Abdullah, interviewed at the turn of the 21st century, believed his father came from Zanzibar.

In addition to parading and performing military music as a show of force to assert the authority of the Nizam, the African soldiers also performed their own music for the court, which included drumming, dancing and singing. These regiments were disbanded after India's independence in 1947. The soldiers' descendants continue to live in the "AC Guards District" of Hyderabad. While their exact African origins are unknown, the Chaush of Somali background can recount their genealogies. Some descendants remember their parents greeting friends in Swahili—the lingua franca for many of the Africans taken out of East Africa.

### *Siddis Today*

A number of Siddis converted to Christianity in the 20th century and were sent to Mauritius, the Seychelles and Kenya with support from Christian missionaries. Those who went to Kenya settled in Freretown, near Mombasa. However, they remained relatively isolated, given that the majority of people around them were Muslim.

Today, the number of Siddis in India, who include Muslims, Hindus and Christians, is estimated to be over 50,000. The largest concentration is in the states of Karnataka (southwest). There are an estimated 18,000 Siddis living in the district—mostly descendants of maroons (runaway slaves) from Goa beginning in the 16th century and continuing through the 19th. Their various communities consist of about 10 settlements, each with between five and 40 houses, organized into an association.

About 12,000 Siddis live in Andhra Pradesh (southeast), mostly in the predominantly Muslim city of Hyderabad. Gujarat (northwest) is home to 10,000 Siddis; and smaller communities also exist in the states of Maharashtra (west), Madhya Pradesh (central), Uttar Pradesh (north), and Tamil Nadu (south).

Siddis are considered simultaneously inside and outside the racial and caste classification systems in India and much of the subcontinent. The government of India has recently granted them "special tribal status," guaranteeing them access to jobs and education, but most continue to live in poverty. As the village head of Jambur, in Gujarat, Siddi Aisha Ben Basureem noted, "We have a lot to worry about; people in other villages live happy lives, but our people are miserable." Some Muslim descendants of Africans in Karnataka prefer to be referred to as Muslim rather than Siddi—as they see their connection to the global Muslim world as primary—yet they also participate in Christian festivals; some Muslim Siddis in Karnataka and in Gujarat even pay homage to the Hindu deity Lakshmi. Such activities speak to the multiple ways in which Afro-Indians have connected with each other, despite religious differences, and have learned to navigate their societies.

### *Sri Lanka and the Maldives*

As early as the fifth century, Abyssinians traveled to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and traded in Matota in the northwest. Centuries later, the Portuguese were the first Europeans to bring Africans to Sri Lanka as slaves and mercenary soldiers. The Portuguese had preceded the Dutch, French and British into the long-existing Indian Ocean trade networks, driving the largely forced migration of Africans into various parts of this world. The Portuguese colonial state, the Dutch East India Company and the British East India Company all actively engaged in the Indian Ocean slave-trading of Africans, competing with each other for control of territories and trade routes in the region. Sri Lanka, because of its strategic location in the Indian Ocean, was highly contested. The island served as an emporium in the Indian Ocean and the meeting point between East Africa and East Asia.

During the 14th century, when the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta was at Colombo, he noted "the wazir and ruler of the sea," Jalasti, had "about 500 Abyssinians" serving in his garrison.

Among the Africans taken to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese were those already living in Lisbon, where by the late 15th century a sizable black population had grown. Some would have joined the Portuguese crews destined for the Indian Ocean world, as sailors were increasingly in demand. On their way to the Indian Ocean, and depending on the route taken, Portuguese captains may have also picked up West Africans at El Mina (on the coast of Ghana), at the mouth of the Congo River or the Niger Delta, the Canary Islands, Madeira, the Azores, or in Mozambique and Madagascar on the eastern side of Africa.

By the 17th century, the Portuguese were regularly recruiting Africans to assist them in seizing or defending strategic ports in the Indian Ocean, including those in Sri Lanka. In 1631 African soldiers sent from Goa rescued the Portuguese from an early defeat by the Dutch. Some 100 Kaffir soldiers from Goa joined the Portuguese Captain-General Dom Jorge de Almeida at Cochin in southern India with instructions to continue on to Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, 200 Kaffir soldiers stationed in Cochin were sent directly to Colombo, where they protected the Portuguese—and were paid for their services, indicating that these soldiers were mercenaries. In 1638, the Portuguese Captain-General Diego de Mello de Castro led an attack on Kandy in the forest hills of central Sri Lanka with a force of 300 Kaffirs; two years later more than 100 Kaffir archers fought for the Portuguese against the Dutch at Galle in the south. When the Portuguese finally lost Sri Lanka to the Dutch in 1658, many Kaffirs simply switched their military service to the new rulers; others settled in the Buddhist Kandyan kingdom, which remained under local rule. The local monarch, overseeing a majority indigenous Sinhalese ethnic population, valued the Kaffir soldiers, employing a number of them as his personal guards. Kaffirs therefore served Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist rulers, in addition to Christian Europeans, in the region.

African military prowess in Sri Lanka continued into the 19th century. Joseph Fernando, an African brought to Sri Lanka from Mauritius, along with some 80 other Kaffirs, served the Kandyan kingdom and helped fend off British incursions until 1815.

In addition to being used for military purposes, Africans worked in the construction of forts. The Dutch governor Van Goens Junior noted in the 1670s that 4,000 Kaffirs had built the fortress of Colombo.

By the mid-19th century, Wesleyan missionary Robert Spence Hardy would note that there had been at least 6,000 Kaffirs on the island at some point, but that their numbers had significantly decreased. The figure is an indication of the impact felt by colonizers, missionaries and indigenous Sinhalese and Tamil of the African presence on the island. The number of Kaffirs is difficult to assess, however, because the children of Afro–Sri Lankan women who married non-Kaffir men are not themselves counted as being Kaffir. As a result, thousands of such descendants are less conspicuous in official records, having had their African heritage obscured, if not erased.

Oral histories among the Kaffirs nevertheless illuminate their past or help corroborate what written records exist. Ana Miseliya, the late grand matriarch of the African-descended community of Sirambiyadiya in the Puttalam district on the western coast, traced her community's roots to ancestors brought during the colonial era. According to Miseliya, her forefathers were soldiers who arrived at Trincomalee in the east to help Europeans establish their authority. Historical records indicate that 874 African soldiers served in the 3rd and 4th Ceylon Regiments in the nineteenth century. In 1865, when the 3rd Ceylon Regiment's detachment in Puttalam was disbanded, soldiers from the African garrison were given land in the area, where they retired.

Cultural remnants, in the form of music, dance, language and in some cases material culture are a vital part of Afro–Sri Lankan communities. Kaffirs today regularly perform dances, accompanied by drummers and singers, using lyrics that may not be fully understood by their youngest generation yet serve to preserve aspects of their African heritage. The Kaffirs' cultural impact has also been more broadly felt: the popular Sri Lankan dance called "Kaffrinha Baila" is a direct result of the historic contact between the Kaffirs, Portuguese and Sinhalese.

Traveling on Arab dhows, Africans populated the Maldives, an archipelago to the west of Sri Lanka, beginning in the 12th century, if not earlier. Arabs had been trading with islanders as early as the mid-ninth century for the cowry shells that were used as a currency in both East Africa and South Asia. Africans were variously referred to as Baburu, Habshi and Siddi (the term Kaffir, used in nearby Sri Lanka, was not used by Maldivians).

In 1153 the Maldivian king, who had been a Buddhist, converted to Islam, establishing a long-ruling sultanate. Two centuries later, Ibn Battuta noted the African presence in the Maldives. During his stay between 1344 and 1346 he visited the Habshigefanu Magan (shrine of the worthy African), Shaikh Najib, a Muslim African saint who had died decades earlier in the Maldives. On the island of Kinalos the Moroccan traveler was welcomed by the island chief, Abd al-Aziz al-Makdashawi (of Mogadishu, Somalia).

Africans had been taken to the Maldives as part of the regular slave trade in the region but also by sultans returning from the pilgrimage to Mecca. During the mid-15th century, Sultan Hasan III reportedly brought back to the Maldives some 70 African captives after performing the hajj. Most of the enslaved Africans in the Maldives worked as coconut plantation keepers, planting and harvesting coconut trees for the production of coir rope (made out of the fibers of the trees), a particularly valuable commodity, sought throughout Asia for maritime-related industries.

Although most Africans have assimilated into the local societies, having intermarried with the local populations, their cultural legacy remains. As in other areas of the Indian Ocean world, a genre of music associated with Africans and their descendants called *bodu beru* (meaning large drum in the language of Dhivehi) is accompanied by *babaru lava* (black songs), whose words are no longer understood by the Afro-Maldivians—a linguistic phenomenon seen across communities of African descent in the region where the pressure on younger members to assimilate into the dominant societies has led to loss of languages once spoken.

## OUTLYING AREAS

East Africans migrated to outlying areas of the Indian Ocean world: the Far East (China, Japan, and Indonesia) and interior regions of the Middle East (Turkey and Palestine).

### *China, Japan, and Indonesia*

Africans traded with Chinese merchants and royal emissaries during the Sung (1127-1279) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties. During the early 15th century the admiral Cheng Ho-an enslaved Muslim Chinese eunuch—led a series of seven imperial expeditions across the Indian Ocean; in 1415 his fleet brought a giraffe from Somalia, which Chinese court artists later painted in majestic fashion, so impressed were they by the *kirin*, as they called it (derived from the Somali word for giraffe, *giri*). Chinese porcelain dating from this period, and earlier, has been found in the walls of mosques and buildings along the East African coast. Although Chinese sailors and merchants had long made contacts with East Africans, it is not known whether Africans traveled to China prior to the rise of Portuguese naval power in the late 15th century.

Portuguese enlisted the services of Africans as sailors over the course of two centuries; some traveled as part of crews to China. In addition to ivory, tortoise shells and rhino horn from East Africa, some Africans were taken to China—mostly females, who were made concubines. African men also served as soldiers. In 1622 they defended the Portuguese base of Macau from Dutch attacks. That year, despite the seemingly overwhelming force of 13 Dutch ships and 1,300 soldiers, approximately 100 Africans were given arms and, along with another 100 residents, repelled the Dutch.

Africans traveled aboard Portuguese ships to Japan. They manned 2,000-ton carracks—three- and four-masted ships—especially after the Portuguese purchased Macau in 1557. These black sailors of the Indian Ocean traveled between Goa, Macau and Nagasaki; some of the African crewmen are depicted in Western attire in *nanban byobu*, Japanese paintings from the period of Portuguese contact.

Enslaved Africans were not only sailors, and in the case of women, concubines, but served as interpreters as well. While in Macau during the early 17th century, the English traveler Peter Mundy noted two "Abbasin [Abyssinians]"—Chincheo and Antonio—both of whom had run away from the Portuguese and had since become Cantonese interpreters. These Africans, like others in the Indian Ocean world, spoke languages in addition to their own and Swahili. Swahili, with a Bantu grammar and many Arabic words, served as a lingua franca for many enslaved Africans—a kind of bridge between the various linguistic and ethnic origins among captives in East Africa as well as those who crossed the Indian Ocean.



The "Belanda Hitam," or "Black Dutchmen," was the Malay name given to the 3,000 Ghanaians recruited by the Dutch colonial army between 1831 and 1872 to fight in Indonesia. The Asante kingdom of Ghana supplied the predominantly Kuma recruits whom they had enslaved. To avoid the charge of slave trading, the Dutch created a system of offering the enslaved Africans the opportunity to purchase their freedom using advance payment for their future military service. They were taken to Elmina on the Ghanaian coast and received a certificate of manumission upon payment, which went to the Asante. The recruits were then trained at Fort Saint Jago before departing on the long journey to Indonesia.

Typically, the soldiers were recruited at the age of 16 and worked until 30. Upon completion of their service, they were given the option of returning to Ghana. A number of veterans did return and settled down in the area of Elmina with a plot of land given to them by the Dutch governor. Others stayed in Indonesia and married local women, forming communities of their own in garrison towns at Java (Batavia), Purworejo, Solo and Semarang.

### *Turkey*

The Ottoman Empire (1299-1912) initially secured enslaved men, women and children through conquest; however, as the empire expanded it increasingly looked to sub-Saharan Africa for slave labor. As the supply of white slaves from Central and Western Europe had been significantly reduced, especially after the Russian annexation of the Caucasus in the early 19th century, Ottoman Turks turned to the south. During the remainder of the 19th century Ottoman Turks, who controlled the major Red Sea ports, used the regular voyages of pilgrims to Mecca to purchase tens of thousands of African captives. By the 1860s, up to 15,000 individuals were carried annually on Ottoman ships during the pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina. Africans were taken aboard ships at Jeddah and transported up the Red Sea toward the center of the Ottoman Empire in Anatolia.

African males were used in various capacities in the Ottoman Empire, in households, in agriculture and industry, in the military and for specialized tasks. Some were apprenticed to their owners as assistants but sometimes advanced to become partners in businesses. Females served in a range of domestic capacities—as wet nurses, nannies, menials, cooks and washers—as well as concubines in harems. There they had contact with Nubian and Ethiopian eunuchs who protected and maintained the harems; eunuchs, with a value at least three times that of other slaves, also served as palace guards and staff, as confidential servants and as keepers of mosques and tombs.

Although most of the records of African captives concern those who served in courts and urban centers, there are occasional historical references to those who worked in the countryside. Africans were variously used for gang labor in agriculture—for instance, in state-maintained rice cultivation—as well as in mines and for draining marshes.

Africans regularly served in the Ottoman military, largely as infantry, and they also served as musicians, dancers and singers for the wider society. Respect for one of Islam's earliest converts and noted singers, Bilal ibn Rabah Al-Habash, is reflected in muezzin guilds in Turkey that venerate the founder of their sacred art form.



### *Palestine and Israel*

One of the early figures of African descent represented in the area of Palestine is a black maidservant assisting the biblical figure Judith, a Jewish rebel who charms her way into the quarters of a commander of a conquering army and cuts off his head while he is passed out from drinking. The image of the black woman assisting the rebel Jew, a story based on the apocryphal Book of Judith, appears in European Renaissance art and suggests a long presence of Africans in the region. Likewise, in the Christian story of the Magi from the Gospel of Matthew, Balthazaar, one of the "Three Wise Men," or "Three Kings from the East," has long been depicted in the Christian world as Abyssinian. According to biblical tradition, the three visitors present the baby Jesus with gold, frankincense, and myrrh—the last being an aromatic resin native to eastern Ethiopia.

Africans who came to Palestine and settled there included Muslims who had been part of the army of Caliph Omar ibn Al Khatab during the expansion of Islam into the area in A.D. 636. They were joined by others performing the hajj—including in the 20th century—who also visited Jerusalem and decided to stay. During the 13th century, at the time of Mamluk rule, two buildings were constructed on either side of Al'a Ad-Deen Street in the Old City of Jerusalem to house pilgrims. They were soon occupied by Africans who worked as guards of the holy sites. These buildings were later turned into prisons and remained so until 1914. Since 1948 they have been returned to the Africans.

During the later Ottoman period in the 19th century, East Africans—specifically, Nubians and Sudanese—were also taken to the area of Palestine as part of the larger slave trade into the Middle East via Cairo.

Muslims from Chad, Sudan, Senegal and Niger, who arrived during the British Mandate between 1917 and 1948—some to "defend the Muslim holy sites"—formed their own settlements in the area comprising Palestine and Israel. Many of their descendants have assimilated into the local cultures, marrying Arabs and speaking Palestinian Arabic. Christian Ethiopians also migrated, and many live and work on "Ethiopian Street," where they have established a number of Ethiopian churches and monasteries.

Between 1984 and 1991, Beta Israel or Jewish Ethiopians—often referred to by the derogatory term *Falashas*, from migrants in Amharic—settled in Israel under its 1950 Law of Return, allowing all Jews the right to settle and become Israeli citizens. They now number more than 120,000, about a third being born in Israel. A community of African-American Hebrew Israelites—now about 2,000—originally from Chicago migrated to Dimona in the Negev Desert starting in 1969 after having been asked to leave Liberia, where they had first settled. They claim to be descendants of the tribe of Judah. After years of litigation with the State of Israel, they obtained permanent residency in 2003.

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